I am writing to you concerning the need for accessible technology in mainstream mobile phones, smart devices, and personal digital assistants. The problem is that there isn't enough widespread implementation of accessibility technology, currently existing accessible technology is cost-prohibitive or is limiting to the consumer, and that the concept of accessibility is being jeopardized by an industry that's not all that interested in preserving freedom of choice and access for blind persons the same way it does for the sighted.

The fact is that blind persons want the kinds of services, applications, and information via mobile devices that sighted people take for granted. These services, devices, and information sources include and are not limited to text messaging, the ability to configure the device on all menu levels, mobile web browsing and e-mail, instant messaging, on-board maps and turn-by-turn GPS navigation, the ability to save and utilize others' contact information, the purchasing and use of professionally and recreationally related applications and the mobile marketplaces in which these are sold, mobile social networking, on-board media management, and the ability to know who's calling and when. I'm sure you don't think much about these things because you can simply do them by means of a graphical user interface. Currently, only a small percentage of mobile devices are accessible to us as your phone is to you. Most low-end cell phones have no accessibility features installed: we can't see who's calling, manage our contacts, configure our phones, or interact with on-board marketplaces through which recurring service payments are made (this is especially true in the case of pre-paid phones). Some phone makers think it's enough to put voice-dialing on phones, make the dialpad talk when one enters a number, or just read the battery and signal status. Just imagine that that's all the information you can physically get from your phone! I'm sure you'd feel irritated and like you've bought yourself a nice and expensive paperweight. As for higher-end phones, they sometimes include more accessibility features such as text messaging, but a blind person often can't configure their phone independently or do some of the more complicated features that sighted folks take for granted. Again, a nice paperweight compared to what the sighted have. I hate to "beat a dead horse," but the bottom line is that blind people want access to all the functions and services the mobile universe has to offer, and we want to have these things alongside those who are sighted when the sighted have them.

Let's talk about cost. When you purchase a phone or mobile device, you need only pay for the device itself and any service fees that come with it. I, as a blind person, am lucky if I can even find a device that supports a third party screen access program costing me $295.00 a license, and most of these cell phones have to be purchased as unlocked devices not sold under some carrier's discount services (this adds another $200 or more). None of these prices include updates to the accessibility software. the only exception to this rule is Apple's iPhone which contains a fully-functional and accessible platform for no more than what a sighted person pays out of the box. The problem is that AT&T is the only carrier supporting the iPhone right now.
Otherwise, a blind person has to pay whatever the cost of the iPhone is and try to figure out how to

make it work with their current carrier.

More important, that really only gives us one choice for out-of-the-box accessibility. Here's the bottom line on the topic of cost: cell phones are expensive enough without the cost of the screen reader on top and without the benefit of carrier-associated deals that lessen the cost of the hardware. The phone I last purchased (a Nokia N82) cost me $700 just for the phone itself and the screen reader. Most blind people (most people in general) can't afford that; the blindness community also has a 70% unemployment rate, which means that $700 is just too far out of reach for most of us.

finally, let's talk about the phone industry and its attitude toward phone accessibility in general. Apple is currently the only company that's serious about accessibility. With the design of the iPhone 3GS and the iPhone 4, Apple proved that full accessibility is possible (and with a touchscreen, no less) and that accessibility doesn't have to be cost-prohibitive for either the company or for consumers. As a result, blind folks everywhere are getting their hands on these devices.

Samseung has recently developed the Haven, a lower-end cell phone mostly geared for seniors, but that's about it. Otherwise, phone makers really couldn't give a damn. Microsoft is releasing Windows Mobile 7 with their new smart phones; these phones do not have accessibility built-in, nor will they allow for third party applications to access the code inside Windows 7 in order to make it accessible via speech or braille. As for Google's Android, there really hasn't been much work on the accessibility front. Nokia used to be right on board with us to the point where we could count on a third party screen reader to work with their technology. More and more (especially with the recent editions to the Symbian platform such as Ovi), we're seeing less and less accessibility with both on-board Nokia applications or those one can purchase online. Worse yet, Apple is beginning to relax its standards for third party applications: Apple used to require third party developers to use their programming language thus making these applications fully accessible to Apple's screen reader (VoiceOver(. Now, programmers can use whatever language they want which won't guarantee accessibility.

There are loads of issues regarding accessibility and cell phones for blind people. I personally am not as well-versed as some, but I do know that I want the same privilege that you do: I want to purchase a phone and be able to fully use it for no more than what you pay, I want to use a phone for both work and recreation and gain the advantages of doing so, and I want to work with phone makers and legislators in order to make it happen. The FCC is currently at a point where it can do something to get the ball rolling via the creation of various rules and their enforcement. I strongly encourage the FCC to follow up on the suggestions made by those in the total know within the blindness community. Thanks for hearing my comments and those of my colleagues.